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Onge

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INDEX

L. Adam : The Abstract Art of the Aranda 345
K. Bouda : Die Verwandtschaftsverhältnisse des Giljakischen. 355
V. Rosner : Falconry as Followed by the Tribals in Biru 416
J. Maringer : Vorgeschichtliche Ritzzeichnungen in Stein und Fels Nordjapans 425
M. Gusinde and Ch. Sano : Stone Circles in Northern Japan 441
H. Aufenanger : New Stone Implements from the Central Highlands of New Guinea. 456
M. Vanoverbergh : Isneg Songs 463
L. G. Löffler : Khami / Khumi-Vokabulare 505

Analecta et Additamenta

S. D. Messing : The Nonverbal Language of the Ethiopian Toga. 558
S. S. Sarkar : Onge Population and Settlements 561
H. v. Sicard : Ausgrabungen in Rhodesien 564
D. H. Hymes : Ob-Ugric Metrics 574
J. Dornstauder : Befriedung eines wilden Indianerstammes am Juruena (Mato Grosso) 576
H. Huber : Figürliche Darstellungen in der Dach-Dekoration der Krobo und ihre Symbolik. . 578

Miscellanea (581-590), Bibliographia (591-636), Publicationes recentes (637-643), Periodica (644-656)

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[Title page]

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Onge Population and Settlements. — **Introduction.** — Since the opening of the Andaman sub-station of the Department of Anthropology, Government of India, the Little Andaman Island has been visited several times by anthropological experts but the sum-total of knowledge has been rather meagre. We have not yet been able to know accurately the total Onge population. The recent paper by CIPRIANI [1] (1956), on the other hand, gives a hitherto unknown picture of the biology of the Onge population. The latter appears to show, as will be obvious from the data presented below, a high masculinity while CIPRIANI's method of population census shows high feminine population.

Earlier Data. — In a discussion of this nature we can leave aside the Onge population *estimated* at the decennial Censuses and take into account those actually seen and counted. In 1911 the number of Onges actually seen comprised :

adult male	118,	adult female	78
child male	62,	child female	28
	180		106

thus giving a total of 286 individuals. This shows a 10.20 % excess of males in the case of adults and an excess of 18.89 % males in the case of children.

During the Census of 1921, a total number of 99 individuals was counted at the following places :

	Rutland Island	Tochiewe	Toibalawe	Teressdda [2]	Total
Adult male	27	6	6	5	44
Adult female	18	–	5	3	26
Child male	8	1	3	5	17
Child female	8	–	2	2	12
	61	7	16	15	99

Eighty Onges were counted in 1911 on Rutland Island, which number decreased by about 24 % to 61 in 1921. No Onges were reported from the same island during the Census of 1931 and at present there appears to be none, either. The details of the 80 Onges reported in 1911 are unknown.

The Rutland population of 1921, however, shows an excess of 10 % adult males while the child population shows the two sexes in equal numbers. The total population, actually seen in 1921, shows an excess of 12.86 % adult males while it is 8.62 % in the case of children. Compared with the 1911 population it appears that the adult male excess has increased by 2.66 % in 1921 while the child population shows a favourable decrease by 10.37 %.

Recent Data. — On February 25, 1948 during the first trip of the Department of Anthropology [3], 38 individuals were counted before the communal hut of Tambebui, which comprised 17 adult males, 15 adult females and 6 children, 4 males and 2 females. The higher number of males among both the adults and children is apparent in this small sample. The above 38 individuals comprised 4 persons, 2 males and 2 females, from the communal hut of Laito, which had been visited by the above party the day before. The total population of the communal hut of Tambebui is probably 34, which is in striking contrast to the population of 4 souls for the communal hut of Laito.

GUHA also mentions the January, 1949 trip by the Department of Anthropology into Hut Bay, towards the south of the island, where 11 individuals, comprising 2 adult males, 6 adult females and 3 children (sex not mentioned) were seen in the local communal hut. The latter contained 9 sleeping places only.

The 1952 and 1953 parties of the Department of Anthropology were led by LIDIO CIPRIANI. His account is difficult to follow. There are very few relevant data regarding

[1] LIDIO CIPRIANI, Report on a Survey of the Little Andaman during 1951-52. Bull. Dept. Anth. 2. 1956, pp. 61-82.
[2] So spelt in the 1921 Census.
[3] B. S. GUHA, Report of a Survey of the Inhabitants of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands during 1948-49, I. Calcutta 1952, pp. 1-7.

7: Sarkar D-4, 5 (1948) 1960 AZ2 Andamans AZ2
Onge

the actual Onge population. He has estimated the population instead of giving a simple population figure for each of the Onge settlements he visited. His estimates are based on the number of sleeping places in a hut, though nothing definite could be found either with regard to the total number of communal huts or the sleeping places. Then, to find out the sex of the individuals from the sleeping places seems preposterous. CIPRIANI (1956) estimates the total Onge population to be 607, comprising "229 adult men, 241 adult women and 137 children". He was able to determine the sex of the children in about 80 % of the cases, since immediately after the above quotation, he states: "Of the latter 48 are boys, 62 girls, and of 27 sex could not be ascertained". In the same paper and just two sentences before, where he gave the above figures, he mentioned a total of 497 individuals, comprising 242 men and 255 women. If the latter figures are meant only for adults then with the addition of 137 children to the above adult population of 497, the total Onge population appears to be 634. Even then the discrepancies in the adult population remain to be explained; it adds up to 470 (229 males, 241 females) once and to 497 (242 males, 255 females) another time.

The only thing that has some value in the demography of the Onges is that he has collected personal names of 107 adult males and 105 adult females. It is not known why the children have been excluded. At any rate, the personal names indicate a slightly higher number of males (50.5 %) than females while the total estimate for adults shows a hitherto unknown Onge sex ratio. With an adult population of 229 males and 241 females, the sex ratio works up to 48.7 % males and 51.3 % females.

Population estimates are always hazardous and, from all reports, the Onges appear to be a dwindling population. R. F. LOWIS, the Census Superintendent for the Andamans during 1911 and 1921 was frank enough to admit in 1921 that his 1911 estimate was "too high", though he gave one for 1921.

It is surprising that neither the Andaman Government nor the Department of Anthropology provided CIPRIANI with an assistant, trained among aboriginal people, who could have been of much help to him. At least the Onges could have been counted in each of the localities visited.

Settlements. — The typical Onge settlement is the communal hut, which is usually located on the beach. CIPRIANI mentions the communal huts in the interior of the island, but does not describe their details.

During the 1911 and 1921 Censuses coastal trips round the island were made and the former Census provides a very good map with the names of twenty settlements scattered on the island. The names are: 1) *Tambeibui* [4], 2) Uede, 3) *Nachuge*, 4) Tochiewe, 5) Tochengedu, 6) Quoname, 7) *Geojege*, 8) *Ingoi-tijala*, 9) *Endea-geleda*, 10) To-to-bwe (unoccupied), 11) *Titugalute*, 12) *Toibalawe*, 13) Tordeada (unoccupied), 14) *Kwanteta-huage*, 15) Koreale, 16) Porale, 17) *Chetamale*, 18) *Titaiye*, 19) Ogechai, 20) Obate.

The names of the settlements visited during the 1921 Census are given at the beginning of this paper. It was also mentioned that 14 huts were seen in comparison to 19 (this will probably be 20) in 1911. The names of 15 settlements could be gathered from the Census Report of 1931 and the 10 settlements italicized above can be rather easily correlated with those of 1911.

CIPRIANI's map is again difficult to follow. Firstly, he has not given any idea of the medium of language by which he communicated with the Onges. He has located in his map 18 existing coastal huts, of which the name of one between Otirubara and Benyaboi is missing. The position of the "supposed" huts within the jungle is misleading. Was he equipped with surveying instruments? Then he mentions 11 huts which are "no more in existence". How were they recognised? In what earlier context have they been identified as such? Only five of the eleven names (Obate, Palalankwe [or Kwalalaoque, according to CIPRIANI], Ogechai, Ingoi-tijala and Chetamale) could be correlated with earlier records. Of the 20 coastal huts listed by him four (Nachuge, Geojege [or Gaje, according to CIPRIANI], Titaje and Tambeibui) could be correlated with the names of the 1931 Census map.

[4] So spelt in the 1911 Census.

7:Sarkar D-4, 5 (1948) 1960 AZ2 Andamans AZ2
Onge

and seven with those of the 1911 Census. The total number of twenty existing huts, however, agree in both CIPRIANI's map and the 1911 Census map; only names differ. It would have added greatly to our knowledge had CIPRIANI based his investigations on the 1911 Census map and commented on each of the place names given therein. He also mentions two huts in ruins besides eleven "no more in existence". There is no mention of any newly built hut. All this proves the decadent condition of the Onges. The coastal huts are probably more numerous than those within the jungles and their total number appears to be constant both in 1911 and in 1953.

The Onges have, in recent years, been visited so many times by anthropologists that a well-directed effort could have brought the whole population into a few genealogies — an elementary task in anthropology.

Postscript. — CIPRIANI has now (1959) published[1] the Census figures of the different communal huts. Instead of clarifying the earlier anomalies stated above, his recent population figures have raised further complications, as will be discussed below.

CIPRIANI now (1959) mentions in a footnote on p. 89 of his paper that 125 individuals, comprising 48 adult males, 44 adult females, 22 boys and 11 girls, *have beds in different communal huts*. He gives a total population figure of 394 (130 adult males, 129 adult females, 65 boys and 70 girls) obtained by actual Census from 21 communal huts. To this total figure of 394 he adds another total of 175 individuals (adult males and females 74 each, and 27 children, the latter shown as "males" on p. 90 but as "siblings" on p. 76) estimated for another 7 communal huts. Thus according to a Census of 21 huts and an estimate of 7 others, CIPRIANI now finds a total Onge population of 596, in comparison to his earlier variable figures stated above. There is no attempt to explain the discrepencies in the population figures. It is also unknown why the population of the 7 huts could not be censused, although all of them were visited between March 22 and April 4, 1953.

It is now apparent that his method of Census of the Onges is untenable since about 31.7 % (125 out of 394) of the population have beds in different communal huts. This is in harmony with the roving nature of the Onges, but it shows that only about one third of the population is migratory and about two thirds sedentary. This is probably not true for the Onges. At least, the fixed nature of beds in the communal huts loses its significance and is probably an uncertain criterion for an Onge Census.

As to a recalculation of the Census figures for each of the 21 huts, it is seen that the total population appears to be 382 (129 adult males, 126 adult females, 64 boys and 63 girls) instead of 394 given by CIPRIANI. This definitely shows high masculinity not only among adults but also among the children. With an adult population of 129 males and 126 females the sex ratio works up to 50.6 % males and 49.4 % females, the excess of 1.2 % being statistically significant.

In the present publication CIPRIANI has published personal names of 133 adult males and 140 female adults, but the Onge habit of frequently changing names, mentioned by him on p. 70, has not been substantiated. Since the same issue of the journal contains an anthropometric study of the Onges, in which names of the individuals measured were noted, it would have been worth while testing how far the Onges practise the above custom. As will be obvious from the foregoing as well as from this P. S., CIPRIANI has not started with the known to unravel the unknown.

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[1] L. CIPRIANI, A Survey of Little Andaman during 1954. Bull. Dept. of Anthr. 3. 1959, pp. 66-94.